

Accident / Incident investigation process

Following a work-related accident or injury, an investigation must be promptly conducted to ensure accurate information is obtained. The National Safety Council (NSC) defines an accident as an “unplanned, undesired event, not necessarily resulting in injury, but damaging to property and/or interrupting the activity in process.” The NSC defines an incident as “an undesired event that may cause personal harm or other damage.” Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) does not have specific standards for accident investigation, as a best practice, all accidents and incidents should be investigated regardless of severity. Near-miss incidents in which no damage or harm resulted should also be included. Some employers create an accident investigation checklist to ensure that all areas are covered, as an accident scene can often be chaotic and filled with heightened emotions. Completing an accident investigation will be beneficial in determining safety hazards or safety training that will need to be addressed to reduce the risk of more injuries.

Step 1: Assess the Injury

When a workplace accident occurs, the first thing to do is to identify any injured employees and assess the severity of the injury. Once the severity of the injury has been ascertained, the employer must determine if immediate medical attention is necessary.

Step 2: Obtain Medical Treatment if Necessary

If no medical attention or only first-aid is required, the employer may proceed to Step 3.

If immediate medical attention is necessary, the employer should have a manager take the employee to the nearest emergency room or urgent care facility or call medical assistance to the worksite depending on the severity of the injuries.

The employer should provide the employee with all appropriate forms relating to medical treatment for work-related injuries. This could include some or all of the following forms:

- Medical treatment consent form.
- Workers' compensation panel of physicians.
- Return-to-work release for completion by the physician.
- Copy of the employee's job description (to provide to the physician).
- Copy of the company's light duty policy.

Completion of these forms will provide valuable information to help the employer determine the best way to accommodate the employee's return to work and to promote a healthy recovery from the sustained injuries.

Step 3: Interview Injured Employee and Witness(es)

Once the injured employee's medical needs have been seen to, the next step is to interview the employee and gather information on what, when, how and why the injury occurred. The injured employee should complete an incident report to provide an overview of what happened to cause the accident. The employer should interview all witnesses who have first-hand knowledge of the accident, and each witness should complete a witness statement. Organizations may also want the supervisor to complete an incident report that details what he or she witnessed or any history of the work environment that may have led to the accident. Questions to ask during the investigation might include:

- What was the employee doing at the time of the accident?
- Was the employee qualified to perform this operation?
- Were company procedures being followed?
- Is the job or process new?
- Were proper tools or equipment being used?
- Was the proper supervision being provided?
- Had the employee received training on this operation prior to the accident?
- Where did the accident take place?
- What was the physical condition of the area when the accident occurred (for example, was the temperature of the area hot or cold; if outside, was it wet or muddy, was debris in the way or was the area clear)?
- What were witnesses doing at the time of the accident?
- What immediate or temporary action could have prevented the accident or minimized its effect?
- What long-term or permanent action could have prevented the accident or minimized its effect?
- Had corrective action been recommended in the past but not adopted?

Step 4: Observe Accident Scene and Analyze the Facts

Next, employers should observe the accident scene and take photographs of the area, including objects, wet floors and equipment that may have contributed to the accident (e.g., filing cabinet drawer was left open, and employee tripped over the

drawer; electrical cord was exposed, and employee tripped over cord; crack in concrete floor caused an uneven surface).

Action plans should be immediately implemented to correct any issues that can be addressed to ensure that the work area is safe for employees and customers, such as tagging out faulty equipment. Some questions that the HR professional may look to answer while observing the scene include:

- What prompted this investigation?
- Why did the incident occur?
- What are the facts surrounding the occurrence? (This is the heart of the investigation—the investigator must determine who, what, when, where and why.)
- Has a previous action been taken to correct the problem? If so, what was it? Why did it fail this time?
- What should be done going forward to correct the problem?
- Is there a new method that should be used to correct the problem? Is there a way to eliminate the cause(s) of the incident?
- Employers should document any actions they have taken to secure an unsafe worksite.

Step 5: File a Workers' Compensation Claim

Next, organizations should contact their insurance carriers and file a work-related injury report. All information required by the insurance carrier should be provided; employers should also provide statements and any other relevant supporting documentation, including available doctor's notes, therapy and medical treatment statements, and a return-to-work statement. All work-related claims must be recorded on the OSHA 300 log.

Step 6: Follow Up

The employer should follow up with the employee after the accident investigation has concluded to see how the employee is doing. If the employee is hospitalized, someone from the organization should visit the employee in the hospital. A get-well card signed by co-workers, a fruit basket or flowers will send the message that the company really cares about its employees and will encourage the employee to return to work. If the employee initially declined medical treatment, the employer should confirm with the employee that no medical treatment related to the accident has been necessary.

Step 7: Corrective Action

Corrective action should be identified in terms of how to prevent a recurrence and improve the overall operations of the company. If an employee violated a major or minor safety rule, the employer will need to follow its company work rule violation policy and take the corrective action necessary. Taking immediate corrective action will ensure workplace safety and help reduce or eliminate work-related injuries. Thorough investigations will help employers identify causes of accidents and will reveal any accident trends.